

## **I Hate Purses**

by Ricky Tucker

I.

I hate purses.

II.

Sorry. Let me qualify that. I hate *your* purse.

It's actually nothing personal, I just don't like what it does to either of us.

I mean, I like what it does for you aesthetically. Like, I love how it works contextually as a color catalyst for you and your navy A-line dress, your pearls an albeit traditional but classic touch that sets off a glint of cobalt refinement behind your eyes—that spark of life that makes us all divine... but outside of that, in terms of its utility for me personally, I could very much more than do without your purse. In fact, I hate it. Again, sorry, but in all honesty, I'm not.

III.

Why am I not sorry? Well, off the top, I really don't want to hold your purse. You brought it; you should be the one to hold it.

IV.

And while I don't invest much in others' ideas of how I should represent my particular gender assignment on this earth—you can address me as male/he/his, with the occasional “Hey girl” thrown in for good measure, if you must know—there's something unavoidably crushing to male egos when they have to stand in front of Annie's Pretzels at the Hillsborough Outlets, holding a Gucci clutch, and

standing there just bemused enough to let everyone within a fifty yard radius know:

THIS IS NOT MINE. I SWEAR.

V.

I don't steal purses—more so out of principle than anything else. Or maybe out of spite, which, if you ask me, is way stronger if not more satisfactory a sin than theft. Hell, coveting thy neighbor's ass is even more interesting than theft by sheer virtue of the confusion that sets in when hearing "coveting thy neighbor's ass." Like, what exactly does that entail? Ha, ass/tail...

But theft? No, that's child's play.

VI.

By fifth grade I'd turned into a certifiable prankster. Watched too much Home Alone, I suppose. Except, *my* situation was more seasonally appropriate than Kevin McAlister's. With the ominous prospect of Kris Kringle, that jolly archaic specter, leaving coal in my stocking, I would never have pulled any stunts around the holidays—and while the parents were away!? No. That's prime time to display your surprising level of maturity. "Wait, so you ordered a pizza, deflected the Wet Bandits, AND cleaned the kitchen while we were away," my mom would say. "Here are your extra presents."

Instead, I'd hoard my mischief throughout the year and unleash it at the only appropriate time—April Fool's Day. Mischief is practically legal then. Mrs. Davis' classroom was the place.

I'd colluded with the other ten year old fools from class to execute the perfect plan.

- a. Late in the day, steal the nicely used and therefore dusty chalkboard erasers from the front of the room.
- b. Clap the erasers over Mrs. Davis' chair while she was cleaning up the segmented grapefruit bits from the day's demonstration on fractions. Side note: any lesson on fractions is a thinly veiled commentary on the virtues of sharing. I resented that. My disdain for both this condescending return to Sesame Street tactics and grapefruit (it's so bitter!) made me the perfect person to do the dusting. Also, the whole thing was mostly my bad idea. It turned out no one really wanted any part in it. That should have been my first clue...
- c. Watch as Ms. Davis later sits down on the chalky chair.
- d. Point and laugh uncontrollably at the chalk all over her butt.

Only, the entire scheme had halted by step b. Mrs. Davis had been at the head of the classroom the entire time, watching me behind narrowed eyes as I clapped the erasers over her wooden chair. In retrospect, there were no walls or anything to shield me from view except for Mrs. Davis' desk, which for some reason, like the rest of the room, seemed sized for an 11 year old.

Anyway, several moments later, she walked coolly but quickly from her desk over to mine, extended a grim reaper's finger and pointed it back toward herself telling me to follow her. That's never a good sign.

“What were you doing by my desk earlier?”

“Nothing.”

“I saw you back here.”

“...”

“And, I noticed my purse was sitting here the whole time.”

“What?”

“Did you take something from it?”

“NO. I was trying to play an April Fool’s prank on you...”

I gestured to the chalk on the chair.

We both stood embarrassed for a bit. She finally excused me to my seat, but I could see very clearly in her eyes a distrust that would remain.

Sure, maybe it stemmed from actual events, but they had absolutely nothing to do with April, or fools, or the whimsy of children, or me for that matter. That distrust came directly from her own tainted mind. I suddenly realized then that she had never really liked me in the first place; we were well into the school year, and waves of shitty encounters came flooding back to me with renewed significance. I also figured out then that not only was I disliked in this instance, but I was also universally wanted—and not in the sexy kinda way.

VII.

I am a black man.

VIII.

My mother always says that people who are the most untrusting tend to be the most untrustworthy. I never want to admit that she's right, so the sheer fact that I'm even mentioning this idiom to you right now is evidence that it may just be true. Also, she's been on both sides of this platitude, so her credibility is iron clad.

IX.

Once, in the act of addiction, my mother was arrested and jailed overnight for snatching an old lady's purse—but here's the rub: the old lady beat the shit out of her. With said purse.

After bailing her out, my grandmother, cousins and I all laughed at her. And every once in a while, when a nice pregnant pause sits between the two of us in the car, as we're driving from the airport on Christmas Eve, snowflakes dancing across the North Carolinian pines, our windshield like a reverse snow globe, I like to look over at her, sitting there all stoic in the driver's seat, and say, "Do you remember that time you tried to steal that old lady's purse, and instead, she just beat the shit out of you with it?"

"Yes, Ricky. I remember..."

We laugh.

This is symbolic of some thing or another.

X.

You're on your way to work. You've been on the train for like 25 minutes, standing at the end of the car against the connecting door, because that's where

the A/C hits hardest, and you're trying to control a flop sweat scenario that occurs basically between the months of April and October, annually.

So now you've cooled down. The train isn't crowded, yet when the doors open up at the next stop, for reasons unclear to you, a young white woman gets on and leans up against the same wall you're leaning against. It's a one-person sized wall, and you're wondering to your self if she is barking up the wrong tree sexually, or if she's just suffering from a poor sense of space approximation and/or body dismorphia. Either way, once she starts resting her purse up against your arm, you've had enough.

You passive aggressively move an inch away, which only gives the purse enough space to swing and hit your arm rhythmically along with the train's sway. Four beats in, the woman feels it too. She looks at you, seemingly for the first time. She makes a face. She tucks her purse tightly under her arm. She turns and faces another direction.

You suck your teeth. You take your backpack off on one shoulder so that it mimics a purse. You tuck it tightly under one arm and walk off in a foot-stompy huff in order to hold an absurdist mirror up to the women.

She probably doesn't even notice. But the levity is yours.

XI.

When I ask a friend, family member, or colleague for a pen or a piece of gum, and they say, “Go into my purse; it’s in the zipper pocket...” I just grab the purse and give it to them instead.

XII.

My favorite television program is *Designing Women*, because I’m gay and sometimes the Golden Girls is just too pedestrian.

A standout episode from season 5 is “This is Art?” It’s the one where the ladies of Atlanta’s Sugarbaker interior design firm visit an art gallery owned by Julia’s, Dixie Carter’s, old friend. As savvy as they are when it comes to burlap bar stools, wood paneling, and southwestern minimalism, our designing women are out of their element amongst modern art. They dizzily contemplate the meaning of a giant cerulean dot. Affable Charlene, Jean Smart, sees death, mass destruction, and general chaos in an all black canvas, much to the dismay of her typically savvier colleagues. Earlier that day, Suzanne, Delta Burke, accidentally nail glues her mouth shut, an unbelievable script entry only serving to symbolize the real life press war she and the show’s creators were entangled in at the time. Now at the gallery, lips tightly sealed, she ends up becoming a frustrated, mime-like performance artist, a group of unwitting yuppies applauding her into a hand-jive fury in the corner.

Across the gallery, Julia asks Charlene to momentarily hold her purse. It's a sleek, black little pleather number with an angular white clasp. Charlene, of course, rests it momentarily on a podium to save Suzanne from her on going mime nightmare, rushing over and saying, "Thank you everyone, thank you—there'll be another show in 15 minutes."

The wasps clear. Charlene returns to Julia's purse, which is now being auctioned off as art, sparking a minimal faux purse movement for which Julia is now progenitor. It sells for thousands of dollars. She'd bought it at K-Mart.

I evoke this comedic disparity between vantage points often, especially in my day-to-day encounters. I just feel safer actively knowing that where some people see suspicious behavior and total chaos, others just see a black canvas.

XIII.

You walk into a bar called *No Name* to meet a childhood friend. The two of you share a tattoo and are each other's favorite. When you sit down in the booth, you're the only one that notices there are a few jackets and a couple of purses in the corner. You move slightly away from them, but your attention is split while you're catching up with your friend, because, as you've deduced, the purse and jacket belong to the white girls sitting at the bar directly across from you. They already have drinks, and are not ordering. They're simply occupying two spaces. You half listen to your friend talk about his band, *Night Dawgs*, but from across the room you can feel the anxiety breathing down your neck. On the periphery,



one of the girls is flailing her arms about wildly and pointing them in your direction, the other one listening intently to her drunken friend's appeal. It's loud in there, but you can put two and two together. Oh, and you've also had a few whiskeys at this point. Here's how this shit-show plays out:

"Will you just come get your shit?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sitting here trying to have a conversation with an old friend, and you're worried about your things. It's distracting. Come get your shit, and then maybe I can sit here and finally have a good time."

"Fuck you! I just want my purse."

"Then come get it."

"You're racist."

"That doesn't even make any sense."

She then comes over, grabs her things, and slowly starts walking toward the door as if to leave. Her friend walks ahead of her to encourage her to wrap up this dramatic exit.

"Whatever, fucking faggots, go back to Chelsea where you came from. Brooklyn doesn't need any more assholes," she says.

"We're from North Carolina, ya stupid bitch. And he's straight."

“And what are you even wearing—it looks like a fucking Cosby” sweater.”

“That’s the fucking point!”

They make it to the doorway and stumble out. Your friend is impressed but dismayed. You get up and tell him you need a whisky—you’ll buy him one too.

You stand in the now vacant space at the bar. There’s a cute gay boy sitting next to you, shaking his head. You say hi. He says,

“I’m so sorry about that.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“That’s a friend of mine. She just gets really drunk.”

He looks at his phone.

“Ugh. That’s her now. Again, I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it,” you say.

XIV.

So, I lied to you earlier. I have stolen from a purse. I still hate them, but I have. I hope you can forgive me.

- a. Every Halloween, my cousin Simone would keep her candy in a little white kiddie purse, holding onto her sweets for weeks just to drive the rest of us mad, I suspected. I couldn’t resist. I’d steal a piece a day from October 31<sup>st</sup> till Thanksgiving. I mean, I feel like I was saving her from her own

neurosis, AND teaching her the value of fractions and sharing. She's 3 years younger than me, so in this case it was age appropriate.

- b. Once, in the act of addiction, before my two degrees, one of them advanced, and before a sense of situational irony had the ability to slowly kill me from the inside out, I stole a woman's purse. She'd left it behind at the art house I was working at, and I had contemplated emptying it for two hours before finally taking the \$50 cash for the dope my boyfriend and I sought out most hours of the day. I dropped the purse in the garbage out back. She returned for it an hour after that.

I had to stand there and watch her, teary eyed and glaring at me as my assistant manager advocated for me as the very trustworthy person who cleaned her particular theater after the credits. I will never shake those daggers in her eyes. They were meant especially for me, not a construct—and this time deservedly.

XV.

And that's what gets me. Maybe not the Halloween candy, but for sure the art house purse. It sits there like a blemish on my record, or a giant boil on my ass that prevents me from sitting upright or getting too indignant about the whole thing. A sore spot, one that shifts the dynamic from "They don't know me," to "They may just be right." Isn't that the gotcha with stereotypes though, the pure

tragedy of the exact moment you inadvertently fall into one? But they're rigged, stereotypes, so you never really know what's real. Like, of course black people love fried chicken and watermelon—who fucking doesn't?

The truth that remains with me is that the list of deadly sins isn't annexed off to a certain demographic, because that's wholly absurd. We're all capable. But for some of us, following a moral code isn't just a loose guideline for navigating life—it's an act of defiance.